

5-1-2019

# Olson's "The Essentials of Christian thought: Seeing reality through the biblical story" (book review)

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## Recommended Citation

Laing, John D. (2019) "Olson's "The Essentials of Christian thought: Seeing reality through the biblical story" (book review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 62 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol62/iss1/18>

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# Book Reviews

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Olson, R. E. (2017). *The Essentials of Christian thought: Seeing reality through the biblical story*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 252 pp. \$18.99. ISBN 9780310521556

In this work, Roger Olson, Professor of Theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, has two goals in mind: 1) to provide Christians with a biblically accurate metaphysic, and 2) to help Christian educators reflect on the philosophical underpinnings of the faith they hope to integrate into student learning (p. 9). That is, Olson hopes to explain the metaphysic implied by the Bible so that Christians can ensure their thinking about ultimate reality is in concert with the Bible. He unapologetically advocates for a biblical vision of reality and knowledge and argues that Christians should feel no compulsion to try to reconcile the Bible with philosophies not directly implied in the biblical narrative.

Olson begins by outlining the philosophical landscape. He introduces terms like epistemology, metaphysics, foundationalism, postmodernism, postfoundationalism, and postliberalism. While he admits that his own perspective is postliberal, he is careful to note that his goal is to simply offer the biblical view of reality (as the subtitle suggests). He then examines the way contemporary culture has misunderstood notions of the supernatural and personal, and suggests that a biblical corrective is needed in order to understand that reality need not be seen as impersonal and mere nature. He then draws upon the thought of Claude Tresmontant and Edmund Cherbonnier to argue that the Bible has a metaphysic of its own, characterized by *duality without dualism*, the acknowledgement of separation between God and the good natural order. This biblical view of reality is set over against its ancient competitors, Manicheism, Monism, and Naturalism, all of which have contemporary manifestations. He challenges modern pantheistic spiritualities, scientific metaphysical naturalism, and explains that in some cases, these were even entertained by leading Christian thinkers.

Throughout the work, Olson complains about the influence of philosophy upon the development of Christian theology, and although he admits that some philosophical categories must be used in metaphysical thought, his primary concern is to recover the categories used by the biblical authors in a way that is consistent with their use. This is a laudable goal, but it seems at times that Olson's focus has more to with promoting his own vision of Christian theology – one that is out of step with historic Christianity and instead promotes open theism – and passing it off as *the biblical view*. For example, in his discussion of God's vulnerability and relationship to time, Olson

argues that many “back-to-the-Bible Christian thinkers...have discarded the notion of God’s eternity as *timelessness* or *atemporality*” (pp. 156-57) and suggests that the only other option is a view of God who is so transcendent as to be virtually inaccessible. While it is true that a growing number of thinkers have adopted the everlasting view of divine eternity, it is misleading to suggest that it is anywhere close to the majority. The fact of the matter is that most Christian pastors and scholars still hold to the atemporal view of divine eternity, explicitly to avoid the kinds of philosophical errors Olson himself identified in his work as unbiblical (i.e., pantheistic and panentheistic notions of reality). Similarly, Olson suggests that the reader must decide between the pagan notion of divine immutability as unchanging and unaffected (i.e., apathetic) in all ways, or the biblical view of God as self-limited, changing, and mutable. He fails to even mention the traditional Christian notion of divine immutability as referring to God’s nature only, and not to His posture toward the creatures that He loves. Olson’s use of false dichotomies like these detract from the strength of the work and are unnecessary to the overall point he hopes to make in the book.

Despite these shortcomings, the work is helpful in laying out a basic Christian metaphysic that acknowledges both the natural and supernatural orders, their goodness, and their concert with one another. Olson does an excellent job of challenging the contemporary metaphysic so popular in American culture and at odds with the biblical vision of reality, and of providing readers with practical as well as philosophical solutions to the dilemmas that metaphysical vision presents. His use of interludes – short (2-3 page) but in-depth discussions of topics introduced within the prior chapter – makes for an even more enjoyable read. The work could be useful as an introduction to worldviews/philosophical theology in church, as well as Christian high school, Bible college, or university classroom settings.

### **Reviewer**

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